

Read-aloud as a Preparation Tool for Norm-referenced Tests

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Abstract: University freshmen nowadays, upon entering their school, are suddenly forced to face the reality that they somehow need to get a high score on the TOEIC test before they start recruiting. However, most of them, failing to understand that the text is a norm-referenced test that has no specific coverage, try to prepare for it as if it were a criterion-referenced test such as a high school midterm exam they are accustomed to, which has a relatively detailed and narrow coverage of the English subject. As a result, some mistakenly assume that all they need to do is concentrate single-mindedly on mock problems. Others feel at a loss not knowing what to do with seemingly very puzzling tests. This paper investigates how in-class repeated read-aloud training with an audio recording changes students' attitude toward the preparation of the TOEIC test. After engaging themselves in overlapping, eye-shadowing and shadowing for a period of three months, quite a few students admitted to the decline in their anxiety level of the TOEIC test preparation and started incorporating reading aloud into their out-of-class learning as a way to improve their English proficiency on the whole.

Keywords: *The TOEIC test, Norm-referenced test, Repeated read-aloud training*

Introduction

Quite a few Japanese learners of English with native-like fluency admit that reading aloud (RA) helped them improve their overall English proficiency. If it holds true, introducing reading aloud in the TOEIC classroom seems like a great idea. However, there is some disagreement over the effectiveness of RA among researchers. For example, Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996), doubt that RA contributes to improved pronunciation in spontaneous speech because the controlled texts usually edit out all the redundant features of natural conversation. While acknowledging the opposing viewpoint, Gibson (2008), in defending RA, mentions "RA can sound slightly different from spontaneous speech, but there is no evidence to suggest that this is transferred to free speech" (p.33), and that "it is not RA in itself that is bad practice, but its misuse (p.35)." Gibson is skeptical of "the practice of unprepared reading aloud in class," which "was commonly perceived as an unimaginative and easy time filler for the teacher (p. 29)," but believes that as long as the teacher handles the activity with sensitivity, RA helps students learn prosodic features of the English language, which is a prerequisite to make their output as natural as possible. Many other researchers also have found RA useful to facilitate students' reading, if used with a proper aim in mind. Birch (2002) and Underhill (1994) suggest that teachers should use RA as a vehicle to give students feedback on their decoding skills and comprehension.

Without resorting to the vehicle, it would be impossible to grasp to what extent the student is able to connect graphemes and phonemes. Stanovich (1991) suggests that in reading, it is essential to connect these parts of language for speedy word recognition, which then helps learners improve pronunciation and learn new words. RA can help students practice the connections. A large proportion of students struggle with decoding and chunking, and are in the vicious circle that Nuttall (1996) mentions: Those who are poor at reading are not willing to read much, and because they do not read, they do not find reading enjoyable. Underhill also claims that RA helps students acquire stress-timed patterns of English (1994). As for listening, not aware of the difference between syllable-timed language (Japanese) and stress-timed language (English), students mistakenly believe that they will someday be able to comprehend what sounds like a spell, continuing the ascetic practice of pouring a bubbling stream of English into their ears. According to Chall (1996), after developing automaticity in decoding, we need to unglue ourselves from text and utilize prosodic features such as stress and intonation when reading. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) also mention prosody as a primary element of fluency together with accurate decoding and automatic word recognition, and explain that it “includes appropriately chunking groups of words into phrases or meaningful units” (p. 4).

In order to help struggling learners, two methods were invented: assisted reading (Heckelman, 1969) where a teacher and students read the same passage orally, and repeated reading (Dahl, 1979; Samuels, 1979) where students read a given passage repeatedly in order to develop fluency as well as accuracy. Dowhower (1987) found that repeated reading led to greatly improved speech pausing and intonation, and Herman (1985) found that repeated reading transferred to materials that learners had not read previously. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) support the combination of the two (assisted repeated reading) where students read text repeatedly with help from the tape-recorded model that provides scaffolding. In the case of Japanese learners of English, other than the difficulties in decoding and chunking, they have yet another problem to overcome: their reliance on Japanese word order. Some students seem to believe that reading is a synonym for word-for-word translation, and they cannot read text from left to right. That is partly why some Japanese learners find it difficult to comprehend what is spoken in part four of the TOEIC test (monologue section). Taking this into consideration, incorporating reading aloud activities into TOEIC classes seems valid. In Earl Stevick’s (1989) research interviewing seven successful learners, most of them found reading aloud effective. The activity helped one of them to chunk the text into sense groups while another one found the activity useful in order to improve their pronunciation. As long as teachers are careful of how to handle the activity, the benefits of RA seem to outweigh the disadvantages.

Study

Method

The TOEIC score, in theory, is a reflection of students’ overall English proficiency, but many students are unaware of this and unable to sweep away the anxiety toward the test.

Some do not come up with a better idea than concentrating on stopgap measures such as checking correct answers after solving mock questions. Feeling the urgent need to get them on the right track, the teacher incorporated reading aloud into the lessons as a drastic measure to facilitate students' reading as well as listening development. The study took place in a university TOEIC course of the Tokyo metropolitan area in 2012. On the first class meeting, students got an instruction on the differences between norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests as well as the importance of improving their English proficiency itself. Then, a questionnaire about their anxiety toward the TOEIC test, their reading habits as well as their utilization rate of reading aloud at home with four items to be evaluated on a Likert scale (see Appendix) was administered to forty five students (thirteen males and thirty two females). After that, the teacher gave students an A4 handout of a transcript (with two dialogues from part three and two monologues from part four of the TOEIC test on it). From then on, at the beginning of each lesson, after explaining the vocabulary and pronunciation of one of the passages (each of which is covered every three weeks), the teacher had students read the script aloud. This was in order to not only gain maximum benefit from the text but also to prevent students from getting bored, the read-aloud strategies adopted varied from overlapping (reading aloud along with the CD), eye-shadowing (reproducing what is heard nearly at the same time, reading the script), shadowing (reproducing without reading the script) and looking-up-and-saying (holding a script, memorize a manageable chunk, look up at the partner and say it). At the end of the course, the same questionnaire as the first class was administered.

Measures

Three dependent variables were measured: students' anxiety toward the TOEIC test, their reading behavior and reading habits. The dependent variable in questionnaire item 1 (I'm worried that I do not know how to do well on the TOEIC test.) is students' decreased anxiety toward the TOEIC test. If their test anxiety declines, it is highly probable that the amount of motivation toward, and time spent on preparing for the test will increase. The dependent variable in questionnaire item 2 (When I read, I move my eyes from left to right, without having my eyes go backward and forward.) and 3 (I read chunk by chunk instead of reading word by word.) is students' reading behavior (decoding). The wrong habits of decoding undoubtedly impedes their texts comprehension as well as listening comprehension as you cannot rewind and fast-forward what you hear. Conversely, as Kuhn and Stahl (2003) mention, if you can utilize proper chunking, which is an integral part of prosody, your fluency will improve. The dependent variable in questionnaire item 4 (I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning.) is students' improved learning habits. Since what can be done in the classroom is limited, the chance would be promising that students will promote their own fluency if we could influence students to take up the habit of reading aloud at home.

Data Analysis

First, students' anxiety toward the TOEIC test as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.94$) was significantly higher than that measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(44)$

=6.67, $p < .0001$, two-tailed, $d = 1.15$. Second, students' reading behavior as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.80$) were higher than that measured by Survey 1 ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.70$), $t(16) = 2.37$, $p < 0.03$, two-tailed, $d = 0.64$. Third, students' learning habits (reading aloud at home) as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.74$) was significantly higher than that measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(44) = 5.36$, $p < .0001$, two-tailed, $d = 0.9$

As for the first dependent variable (students' decreased anxiety), the mean difference between the first and second questionnaire was 1.13, and Cohen's d was as high as 1.15 (a large effect). As for the second dependent variable (students' reading behavior), the mean difference was 0.48, and Cohen's d was 0.64 (a medium effect). As for the third dependent variable (students' reading habits), the mean difference was 0.82, and Cohen's d was 0.9 (a large effect). Incidentally, while the average score for a preliminary question ("Using English - speaking, reading and writing - is a good way to improve my English skills.") was 4.7, the average score for questionnaire item 4 ("I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning.") was 2.4. This means that a lot of students, before taking this course, had not actually done what they felt they should do.

Judging from this, it seems that quite a few students came to understand what is necessary to prepare for the TOEIC test after three months of read-aloud training; more than a few students started reading properly; and a great number of students started incorporating read-aloud into their out-of-class learning. It is premature to make a judgment that read-aloud training mostly contributed to the decreased anxiety, but the hypothesis becomes persuasive after reading students' comments that follow.

Changes

Below is the analysis of the students (all pseudonyms) whose response to questionnaire item 1 (I'm worried that I do not know how to do well on the TOEIC test.) showed the biggest jump (from Strongly Agree to Disagree) in the end.

The Change in Mona

In response to questionnaire item 4 ("I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning."), in the 1st questionnaire, the answer was "Rarely," but it was "Often" in the 2nd questionnaire. According to the comments in the first questionnaire, Mona failed to read words in the proper order because she felt forced to completely translate the English into Japanese in her mind. Naturally, she was not good at listening (Mona was unable to comprehend pieces of text in the proper English order). In the comments in the second questionnaire, Mona wrote, "At first, I tended to read English out loud unevenly, but as time went by, got used to it. I was surprised to find out that I gradually became able to read in meaningful chunks with a new passage. That was when I really felt the effectiveness of reading aloud. In high school, I exclusively concentrated on memorizing words, and I was able to get by that way. But, from now on, I am willing to devote myself to reading and listening."

The Change in Masao

In response to questionnaire item No. 4 (“I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning”), in the 1st questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Sometimes” in the 2nd questionnaire. In the free writing section in the second questionnaire, Masao wrote, “One of my fellow club members is from a foreign country, and during the past few months, I found myself able to comprehend the great portion of his utterances without much concentration. As long as what I want to say is not complicated, I became able to make myself understood in English without resorting to Japanese translation. Reading aloud was effective in no small way.”

The Change in Fumio

In response to questionnaire item No. 4 (“I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning”), in the 1st questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Sometimes” in the 2nd questionnaire. In the free writing section in the second questionnaire, Fumio wrote, “When I started reading aloud in this class, I would often read haltingly and inaccurately stumbling over words. However, I gradually gained confidence and began reading smoothly. Then, I even became able to look at the next word while reading aloud. Although listening is still difficult for me, memorizing words became easier after starting reading aloud.”

Discussion and Conclusion

All the three dependent variables (students’ anxiety toward the TOEIC test, their reading behavior and reading habits) improved. Although there is no proof that there is a direct connection between the students’ decreased anxiety level and their improved reading behavior and reading habits, the reading aloud training seems to have prompted changes in most of the students. For example, some acknowledged it motivated them to increase their devotion to English, while others began to be able to read faster because they started reading chunk by chunk. In which area and to what extent they got influenced varies a lot, but what it boils down to is that a lot of their comments on reading aloud included their regret and realization that they had overlooked the significance of working on English proficiency itself rather than solving mock questions. Here is a comment of one of the students who acknowledged the positive impact of reading aloud; “After reading aloud a certain passage many times, the same passage sounded totally different from the first listening. The TOEIC test surely does not measure your reading aloud skills itself, and it seemed like I was making a detour at first. However, I feel my English skills have been getting better the past three months (Haru, pseudonym).” However, it is true that with any form of training, you cannot always expect every student to benefit from the strategy approach being used here. For example, there were four students who said they never or rarely read aloud at home in the first questionnaire and still said they never or rarely did it in the second questionnaire. That said, it seems to be likely that without this training, Mona would still be under the spell of exam-oriented English and smothered by the pain

of memorizing words; Masao would still be having a hard time comprehending what his fellow club member was saying; and Fumio would still be unable to apply the correct way of moving his eyes while reading.

There is no collective view as to which of the following causes the effectiveness of RA: the amount of reading or the repetition itself. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988), BerLiner (1981), Taylor, Frye, and Maruyama (1990) claim that increasing the amount of text learners read leads to an improvement in their reading ability. On the other hand, Homan, Klesius, and Hite (1993) maintain that as long as a learner reads a certain amount of text, there is no significant difference in the improved reading rate of the students. Taking into account the feasibility, having students read repeatedly a small amount of text such as a passage from Part 4 of the TOEIC test seems easier to implement than constantly finding new material of the right level. Reading aloud seems to be a powerful tool to consider and use, especially in a TOEIC class where students tend to forget the important principle that their score is, in theory, a reflection of their well-developed English proficiency.

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Appendix

Students' worry regarding the TOEIC test

1. I'm worried that I don't know how to do well on the TOEIC test.

「TOEIC の成績を上げるために何をしたいかわからず不安だ。」

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

Students' reading behavior

2. When I read, I move my eyes from left to right, without having my eyes go backward and forward.

「英語を読む際、目をキョロキョロさせることなく、語順通りに左から右に読んでいる。」

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

3. I read chunk by chunk instead of reading word by word.

「単語ひとつひとつではなく意味の区切りで塊（かたまり）として読んでいる。」

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Students' learning habits

4. I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning.

「自宅学習の中で音読を取り入れている。」

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never